

LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT – ASSESSMENT OF LOCAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS CONSERVATION AND TOURISM AROUND ROYAL BELUM-TEMENGGOR FOREST COMPLEX, PERAK, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT: This paper shall present and discuss findings from an investigation of locals' attitude toward conservation and sustainable ECT in two Orang Asli villages around Royal Belum and Temenggor Forest Complex (BTFC), Perak. Twenty respondents participated in the questionnaire-guided surveys i.e. twelve and eight respondents from Semelur and Sungai Tiang respectively. The results from the questionnaire survey unveiled positive attitudes of the community towards tourism (92 per cent level of agreement) and strong support for biodiversity conservation (95 per cent level of agreement). The economic fulfilments of the household and income generation are amongst reasons given by the local for future ECT projects. New local jobs will be created and poverty addressed, as indicated by 0.95 Relative Importance Index (RII) value. Similarly, we observed RII value for environmental reason and a growing concern for protecting natural and cultural resources from over-exploitation and extinction (with RII value of 0.95). This study found that benefits resulting from the protected conservation area might substantially increase local supports for better conservation. This paper conclude by putting forth two recommendations to be considered for designing and implementing more comprehensive framework and operational need for sustainable ECT and conservation namely: (1) determination of local community needs and readiness towards sustainable ECT through comprehensive and collaborative research, and (2) organisational and capacity building aimed at preparing community and their stakeholders in realising sustainable ECT development and conservation efforts in protected area.

Keywords: eco-culture tourism, local economic development, orang asli, poverty, Royal Belum-Temenggor Forest Complex

INTRODUCTION

Promoting sustainable rural development (including sustainable tourism and biodiversity conservation programmes in this context) at a local community level is strongly dependent on the informed and strong participation from host community and their stakeholders (Kamarudin, 2013a). As United Nations World Tourism Organization (Graci and Dodds, 2010) highlighted:

“Sustainable tourism development requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus building”.

The statement expressed that a successful local economic development (LED) including sustainable tourism and biodiversity conservation projects require strong and continuous support, and ‘buy-in’ from local community and their stakeholders. Therefore, the assessment of local attitudes towards LED programmes have become more important as it will provide vital information regarding the level of awareness, understanding and acceptance toward certain LED programmes, which in turn, would determine the outcome of any LED programmes including sustainable tourism and biodiversity conservation programmes which are the focus of this study.

With its core principle being the promotion of local community development through biodiversity conservation, the relationship between tourism benefits and local support for conservation especially in BTFC has not been thoroughly explored. Despite high recognition received by BTFC, very few attempts have been made to establish and analyse the link between local attitude and support for conservation and tourism (Razak et al., 2015; Kamarudin et al., 2014b; Abdullah et al., 2013; Ang and

Chan, 2009). This gap, in turn, has provided a strong justification for this study to be conducted in BTFC area. The overall structure of this paper is as follows. First, it begins with a brief explanation of the strategy for rural development through the concept of inclusiveness, followed by the discussion on local economic development and conservation through sustainable ECT. The subsequent section then addresses methods of data collection and analysis technique, followed by another section discussing the results and findings. The final section would report conclusion and recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Inclusiveness” as a Strategy for Local Economic Development

One of the key focus highlighted in the 11th Malaysia Plan (2016-2020) is the urgent need to tackle the issue of housing for those with income at the bottom 40 per cent (herein referred as B40 group) through inclusive developmental strategies. The term “inclusiveness” is used to address development that focused on the need of 2.7 million household in Malaysia identified as B40 in year 2014 (EPU, 2015). As a response to these targets, current and continuous initiatives for overcoming the following issues; i) combating poverty, ii) rising cost of living, and iii) promoting social justice have been introduced by the Government Transformation Programme (GTP) such as 1Malaysia Clinic, 1Malaysia People Menu, 1Malaysia People Shop, 1Malaysia Textile Shop and 1Malaysia People Agrobazaar Shop. The aforementioned programmes should be maintained and more facilities/services are expected to be developed in other areas during the 11MP period (PEMANDU, 2013; EPU, 2015).

Apart from provision of necessary infrastructure and services, reducing poverty and rising the household income for B40 is very challenging and require a reliable strategy. An integrated research is much needed to improve the aforementioned issues through education, training programmes and diversification of local economic base, aiming at high-income generation through innovation. There is a need to diversify rural economic activities to improve socio-economic and wellbeing of B40 group under GTP and 11MP. Similar focus for inclusive development should be delivered for every citizen equally and without any exception, in this case, the Orang Asli B40 community of Malaysia.

Regarded as one of the minority ethnic group in Malaysia’s plural society, Orang Asli population in 2008 only comprises 0.005 per cent of the nation’s total population (or 141,230 people) (Ministry of Regional and Rural Development online statistics²). The level of poverty among Orang Asli recorded in 2008 is very high that is more than 88 per cent of its total population³. This alarming situation put this community directly under the most vulnerable ethnic group and under the B40 group and therefore, a specific study on locals’ attitude towards conservation and rural developmental project through tourism programme is being initiated as part of inclusive development strategy for Orang Asli community.

Sustainable Eco-Culture Tourism: An inclusive strategy for local economic development and conservation

According to Kamarudin (2007), sustainable ECT can be defined as “an individual or a certain human group travel to enjoy the nature’s beauty and also the unique cultural diversity of human populating the earth, where the relationship between both elements (nature and the local community’s culture) happens symbiotically”. The definition also strengthens the core principle of sustainable ECT which is to promote local community development through biodiversity conservation and to maintain a symbiotic relationship between host community, tourists and local tourism resources (see Figure 1).

² <http://www.rurallink.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/127.pdf>

³ <http://www.rurallink.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/66.pdf>

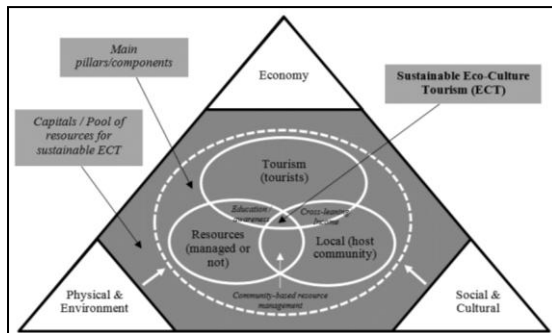


Figure 1: Conceptual model for sustainable eco-culture tourism

Source: Kamarudin et al. (2015), Kamarudin and Ngah (2007) and Kamarudin (2007)

The development of sustainable ECT programmes is primarily driven by the host community's desire to fulfil their economic objectives. A review of literature (see Kamarudin 2013b; Graci and Dodds, 2010; Sebele, 2010; Manyara and Jones, 2007; Sharpley and Sharpley, 1997) suggested the following direct and indirect benefits of conservation of unique natural and cultural resources with relation to sustainable ECT programme:

- 1) Provides both the financial resources and stimulus for the conservation, protection and improvement of the natural rural environment.
- 2) Supports the conservation and improvement of the historic sites and architectural character, including traditional houses.
- 3) Leads to environmental improvements in rural towns and villages infrastructures, such as solid waste disposal systems, sewage, traffic regulation and general improvements to buildings.
- 4) Promotes environmental awareness among members of the host communities. By observing interests showed by tourists in appreciating local natural beauty, this might increase the environmental awareness among host communities to protect and conserve their environment for tourism benefits.

Similarly, the development of tourism and tourism-related businesses by rural community and their stakeholders could contribute positively towards conservation of unique natural and cultural resources (Stone and Stone, 2011; Barna et al., 2011; Sebele, 2010; Manyara and Jones, 2007). Conservation of surrounding rural resources, for instance, the forest area and forest products, agriculture and water bodies will maintain attractive environment while reducing exploitation of natural resources. The promotion of conservation efforts could also educate the communities and their stakeholders on conserving their surrounding environment for tourism purposes (Kamarudin, 2013b). With respect to the direct and indirect economic and environmental benefits to the host communities, ECT programmes could act as a double-edged sword, as the development of sustainable ECT might potentially harm or damage local economics and its environment (natural and culture), depending on how the activities are developed and managed (Kamarudin, 2013b; Sebele, 2010).

CASE STUDY OF TWO COMMUNITIES AND STUDY APPROACH

The study has selected two *Orang Asli* settlements as case study subjects namely Kampung Semelor of Temenggor Forest Complex and Kampung Sungai Tiang of Royal Belum State Park (Figure 2). Primary data and information were systematically gathered using both quantitative (via questionnaire-guided surveys) and qualitative approaches (via unstructured interviews and field observations) in June 2014. Meanwhile, secondary data and information were gathered from reviews of village census books and unpublished census records from the Department of Orang Asli Development (Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli, JAKOA, 2014) Gerik.

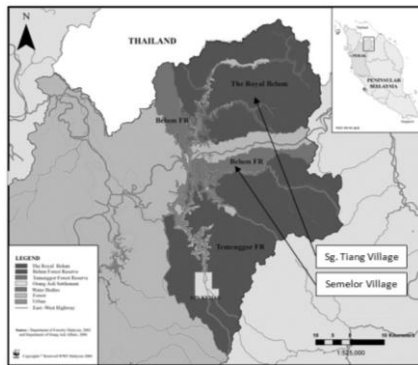


Figure 2: Map of the study areas located in Kampung Semelur and Kampung Sungai Tiang, Perak
Source: WWF-Malaysia (www.wwf.org.my)

Twenty (20) respondents participated in the questionnaire-guided surveys i.e. twelve respondents from Kampung Semelur and eight respondents from Kampung Sungai Tiang. Two different approaches were adopted when conducting the survey on the local communities, and decisions were made based on different circumstances faced during visits to each village. A meeting was held with the respondents in the village community hall (*Balai Sewang*), Kampung Semelur. The ‘door-to-door’ interview sessions were done in Kampung Sungai Tiang, as it was impossible to meet respondents collectively during the time allocated for the field survey. Perhaps it is worth mentioning that the number of respondents present for the survey was very low and far from the initial target of 55 respondents (as suggested by a formula for a valid sample size). This low respondent rate can be contributed to the following two factors:

1. Lack of interest from the local people (and also due to timidity) to participate because they do not understand the purpose of this study.
2. Insufficient time allocated for the site visit and survey on the local community. The visit was very brief (one day to cover each village), hence the researchers were unable to capture sufficient tangible and intangible inputs from the communities. According to many ethnographic studies, a longer stay is required for each case study to build rapport with the community and potential respondents (Kamarudin and Ngah, 2007).

We examined the feedback by respondents regarding the most influential and/or the less influential and ranked them based on the attributes presented in the form of criticality. The analysis was assisted by the use of Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) where data were keyed into SPSS worksheet or database. The Relative Importance Index (RII) is computed as perceived by the respondents (see equation below) (see Muhwezi et al., 2014 for more discussions on RII):

$$RII = \frac{\sum W}{A * N} \quad (0 \leq RII \leq 1)$$

Where:

W – is the weight given to each factor by the respondents and ranges from 1 to 5, (where “1” is “not important” and “5” is “very important”)

A – is the highest weight (i.e. 5 in this case)

N – is the total number of respondents

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section, we discuss the results of the assessment of local attitude towards local economic development, tourism and conservation.

Local attitudes towards conservation and sustainable ECT

Table 1 of this study identified respondents' reasons for supporting sustainable ECT in the study area. The idea of sustainable ECT is shared between "the respondents' desire to increase opportunity in income generation – as a full-time job" and "the potential to enhance protection of local biodiversity and socio-culture" with RII value of 0.95, respectively (see Table 1). In this study, the respondents have also included "the need for acquiring suitable skills and experience in tourism-related activities through training" (RII=0.89), "as training ground for future leaders in managing sustainable ECT" (RII=0.87), "potential for receiving development funds by government/private investors" (RII=0.85). Meanwhile, three reasons were ranked as less influential by respondents reported as "potential for income generation – as a part-time job" and "potential for local facilities (physical and communication) improvement" which shared the RII value of 0.79, followed by "increase internal link for marketing of local ECT products and SME products" (RII=0.76).

Table 1: Reasons for supporting sustainable ECT programme (n=20)

Answers given by respondents	Likert scale					n=	RII	Rank
	1	2	3	4	5			
• Potential for income generation (as in full-time job)	0	0	1	3	16	20	0.95	1
• Potential for income generation (as in part-time job)	0	0	3	15	2	20	0.79	5
• Gaining experience/ skill in tourism-related activities through training (human capital development and entrepreneurship)	0	0	2	7	11	20	0.89	2
• Potential for local facilities improvement (physical and communication)	0	0	2	17	1	20	0.79	5
• Increase protection of local environment and socio-culture opportunities	0	0	0	5	15	20	0.95	1
• Increase internal link for marketing of local ECT products and SME products	0	0	7	10	3	20	0.76	6
• Training ground for future leaders in managing sustainable ECT	0	0	3	7	10	20	0.87	3
• Potential for receiving development funds by government/ private investors	0	0	0	15	5	20	0.85	4

Source: Research fieldwork in 2014.

Note: 1 denoted "not important" and 5 denoted "very important" / RII (Relative importance index)

Possible challenges or constraints for adopting sustainable ECT

Based on Table 2, this study revealed the possible challenges or constraints for adopting sustainable ECT in the study area.

Table 2: Possible challenges/constraints of sustainable ECT (n=20)

Answers given by respondents	Likert scale					n=	RII	Rank
	1	2	3	4	5			
Tough competition with existing tourism players / operators from outside	0	0	7	10	3	20	0.76	5
Language barriers (English in communication)	0	0	3	15	2	20	0.79	4
Lack of access to the village (due to poor road and internet/communication coverage)	0	0	2	7	11	20	0.89	2
Lack of capital and organizational readiness (lack of local leaders / entrepreneurs)	0	0	1	3	16	20	0.95	1
Seasonality of activities and hard to maintain costumers (income instability)	0	0	3	15	2	20	0.79	4
Lack of training in tourism-related activities (past experience)	0	0	7	10	3	20	0.76	5
Modernization and culture distribution (influenced by visitors)	0	0	3	7	10	20	0.87	3

Source: Research fieldwork in 2014

Note: 1 denoted "not important" and 5 denoted "very important" / RII (Relative importance index)

The most severe challenges or constraints were caused by a lack of capital and organisational readiness (0.95 RII), followed by the limited accessibility to the village mainly due to poor road condition and limited internet or telecommunication coverage (0.89 RII), and modernization and culture distortion induced by interaction with visitors (0.87 RII). Other challenges or constraints factors have to do with language barriers – to communicate in English and seasonality of activities and difficulty to maintain customers resulting in income instability (0.79 RII). The low influential factors are recorded as a strong competition with existing tourism players or operators from outside and significant lack of proper training in tourism-related activities, with RII value of 0.76 respectively.

Discussion

The questionnaire survey reported positive attitude of local community towards tourism (92 per cent level of agreement) and strong support for biodiversity conservation (95 per cent level of agreement). This study also revealed the acknowledgement of symbiotic relation between local economic development through sustainable ECT and the community in the protected area. It is worth mentioning that the reasons behinds local support for future sustainable ECT programmes are mostly driven by the economic factor especially for income generation and creation of new local jobs (both full-time and part-time) in the tourism-related sectors (see Table 1). Similarly, the respondents also expressed their concern towards protection of surrounding natural and cultural resources from over-exploitation and extinction. Respondents are well aware of strict regulations imposed by the Perak State Park Corporation for protecting environment and natural resources, even though some of the regulations imposed restriction on local physical and socio-economic development. One clear example is forest clearance activities for expansion of new or existing settlement and opening new agriculture land. Normally, local practice in opening new land may involve cutting trees and slash-burn activity. This traditional practice was considered as a disturbance agent to the pristine forest environment (Razak et al., 2015).

This research promotes active involvement of local community in the programme and conservation activities in the protected area. This effort is strongly supported by the benefits offered throughout the programme. The success of each activity and its deliverables are highly dependent on several issues, e.g. poverty, insufficient fund, poor financial assistance, selective incentive, limited land for economic activities, incapable leaders and low readiness of targeted groups. These factors subsequently affected the effectiveness of activities in the ECT business. An integrated local economic development initiative should be proposed for the future development planning of BTFC.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study unveiled positive responses from local communities regarding ECT programme especially on economic and conservation of environment prospects. Some possible challenges or constraints of ECT programme also highlighted some issues related to financial constraint due to high poverty, the contest for resources among members as a result of population increment and lack of integration (linkages) of local economic activities with surrounding development (Kamarudin et al., 2014b; Razak et al., 2015). Interestingly, this study highlighted the use of respondents' positive attitude towards tourism and their support for conservation in such a way of promoting a better park management and interaction between man-and-environment in the tropics.

The paper put forward two recommendations to be considered for designing and implementing a more comprehensive and collaborative framework and operational need for eco-tourism and conservation. The first recommendation would be the determination of local community needs and readiness towards sustainable ECT including determination of local tourism resources (culture, heritage and nature resources, assessing local community's acceptance and willingness to support and to participate in ECT development, determination of local knowledge, practices and skills which are suitable for supporting the development of ECT programme, and determination of capital capability and availability for executing ECT programme (financial strength). The second recommendation

includes organisational and capacity building process including encouragement of a direct local community and stakeholders' engagement into decision making process, establishment of potential linkages between local tourism with surrounding attractions and identification of types of training need and training module development suitable for sustainable ECT programme.

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